

WHAT IS THE CHURCH SOCIAL TEACHING SAYING ABOUT LABOUR?

Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection

“Promoting Faith and Justice”

Anold Moyo, S.J.

What is the Church Social Teaching Saying about Labour?

Work is a fundamental right and a good for mankind, a useful good, worthy of man because it is an appropriate way for him to give expression to and enhance his human dignity. The Church teaches the value of work not only because it is always something that belongs to the person but also because of its nature as something necessary. Work is needed to form and maintain a family, to have a right to property and to contribute to the common good of the human family (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church).

The purpose of this booklet is to stimulate reflection, prayer and action among Christian groups (e.g., Small Christian Communities, Youth Groups, Justice and Peace Groups, Bible Study Groups, Fellowship Groups, etc.) on the subject of labour as viewed from the perspective of the Church's Social Teaching.

The booklet is designed as a study guide consisting of four sessions that follow the "Pastoral Circle", encouraging us to:

- Begin with our own **experience** by asking what is happening.
- Move to a **social analysis** of why such a state of affairs exists.
- Do some **theological reflection** by considering what it means to us.
- Move to an appropriate **response** of action by considering what we can do as a Christian community in such a situation.

We encourage you to send your comments and suggestions to us at the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) on how we can improve our reflections on the Church's Social Teaching. We are also very interested in hearing about how you would have used this pamphlet to move towards action in promoting social justice in the area of labour.

Anold Moyo, S.J.
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Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
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Introduction

Ever since the origin of human life, human beings have had to work for their upkeep and survival. However, unlike pre-historic times where labour was mostly of an informal, subsistence, and individualised nature, today it has become more complex and formalised, with people having to seek paid work for their sustenance. Because of the importance of work in the well-being of every human being, governments in almost all countries have made employment creation a development objective in their national planning, although with different levels of commitment and success.

Yet despite the necessity of paid work, many people remain unemployed, and those that are employed do not always work under good conditions or get decent and just salaries. The employment situation in Zambia is dire. Out of a labour force of 5, 413,518, only 522,761(9.7%) people are employed in the formal sector, with the remaining 4, 699,585 (90.3%) being in informal employment where they are either paid very low wages, paid irregularly, or not paid at all.

Employment, particularly formal employment is a good that brings with it both individual and social benefits. There is a direct correlation between employment and poverty reduction. Employment guarantees income, and income is necessary for the acquisition of and access to basic needs and property. The larger the percentage of the formally employed, the lower the poverty levels in a country will likely be, provided that those employed get decent and just remuneration. Formal employment also offers workers the opportunity to sharpen their skills, thereby increasing the skills base of the labour force, making possible the economic and social advancement of communities.

The social value of employment is also seen in its stimulating effect on the economy as a result of an increase in local demand for goods and services, a direct result of an increase in income levels within the populace. Furthermore, a rise in the country's employment rate provides the Government with the opportunity of broadening its revenue base through taxation. Growth in the economy facilitates human and infrastructural development in the country. Employment thus contributes to the development of individuals and to the general development of the country. It is an important transmission mechanism between economic growth and poverty reduction.

Because of the importance of labour and its instrumental role in the realisation of decent human living conditions, and therefore in the promotion of the dignity of the human person, labour becomes a social subject that the Church has deeply reflected on and offered insights into its intrinsic value. It is to these insights that we would like to tap into in our discussion and reflection on the subject of labour, for the promotion of justice for all, especially for workers. In this booklet, the terms "labour", "work" and "employment" will be used interchangeably to mean activity that is undertaken for the generation of income.

Session One: Experience

In this session, we shall examine in brief the lives of three people who face various labour challenges. The stories of these people are representative of the employment challenges that many people in Zambia face. The first story highlights the perennial problem of unemployment that Zambia faces. The second story depicts the problem of low wages for most of the Zambian workforce, both those in formal and in informal employment. The last story gives a glimpse of the poor working conditions that some workers are subjected to in their workplaces.

Story One

Samantha is a graduate of the University of Zambia. She finished her studies in development a year ago. Since then, she has been applying to various organisations, companies and Government departments for a job, but to no avail. Since she has failed to find employment, she now spends most of her time just sitting at home. At times she does get lucky and is called for short-contract jobs from which she gets little remuneration. These short-contract jobs however do not provide any security since they are short term and are irregular.

Samantha is among thousands of Zambian young people who have finished college and university but cannot find employment. Some of her peers, out of frustration, have resorted to alcohol and drug abuse, as well as prostitution.

Story Two

Mr Bwalya is an employee of a Lusaka construction company. His work involves constructing buildings such as residential houses, office buildings and stores. The work is physically demanding, yet the salary he gets is far short of what he requires for his and his family's upkeep. For his family of six to live a decent life, they require at least K2, 500,000 a month. Mr Bwalya only earns a net salary of K800, 000 a month and is the sole income earner in the family.

It is difficult for him and his colleagues to express their grievances to the company management for fear of being fired. They do not belong to any union that can help them advocate their needs.

Story Three

Mr Lungu works as a miner for a mining company in the Copperbelt. He has been a miner for the past 10 years. The mine, operated by a foreign investor, does not provide good protective clothing to the miners. The clothing that they wear is worn out and exposes them to difference hazards. Due to prolonged exposure to dust, Mr Lungu has developed serious chest complications on which he has spent a lot of money trying to get treated. The mining company only provides a small amount of money for the health needs of the miners.

The company, however, makes huge profits from the gold it extracts from the mine. It could raise the salaries and health allowances of the workers and still remain with huge profits. But because it wants to make as much money as it possibly can, it tries to make its operations as cost-effective and cheap as possible, which compromises the quality of the working conditions and heightens the risk of injury or contraction of diseases.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever found yourself in the situation of any of the people mentioned in the three stories above?
2. What other challenges do you think are faced by workers or by those seeking employment?
3. What effects of unemployment do you see in your community?

Concluding Prayer

God our Father, you created us and blessed us with different gifts and talents. May our talents find expression in the various works we do everyday. Most importantly, we ask for the working opportunities that are lacking in our country, so that through working we may be able to sustain ourselves and live a dignified life that you desire for all of us. Amen.

Session Two: Social Analysis

Having looked at various people's experiences in relation to labour, we now seek to understand why the problems of employment highlighted in the above stories happen. We look at those factors that seem to contribute the most to the problem of unemployment; that of low employment wages and that of poor labour conditions that many people face in their work places.

The Problem of Unemployment

Non-Employment Intensive Economic Growth

In the last few years, Zambia has witnessed steady economic growth, mostly due to an increase in foreign direct investment. However, this growth has not contributed to a significant increase in employment levels in the country. This is because the growth has mainly been driven by a high productive sector (mining), which only employs 1.52% of the national labour force, whereas the less productive sectors, especially those in the informal economy, have been neglected. Because of this, economic growth has not enhanced employment and therefore earning opportunities for the majority poor, who mainly derive their income from work. What is desired is for growth to also occur in employment-intensive sectors, that is, those sectors of the economy that employ a large number of people, especially the poor. Agriculture is one such sector. These employment intensive-sectors also ought to be made more productive for better remuneration for workers.

Investment Laws

The country's foreign investment laws may hamper local efforts at creating employment. If the laws are more favourable to foreign companies to the detriment of the growth of local businesses, such as they seem to be in Zambia with regard to taxation, then this has the potential to harm local business, which in turn has a negative implication on employment. Foreign companies coming to operate in Zambia are usually exempted from paying tax for a minimum of five years, a privilege not given to local companies whose production costs will then have to be higher than among foreign owned businesses. Some of these local businesses operate in buildings and complexes owned by foreign companies, to whom they have to pay comparatively high rates for rent. Consequently, local businesses suffer and are forced to employ few local people to reduce management costs.

On the other hand, foreign businesses have the habit of bringing their own labour force, thus further shrinking the opportunity for locals to find employment. The jobs offered to locals by some of these foreign companies are low quality jobs that do not give decent remuneration. Also, foreign businesses tend to import their own supplies from their own mother countries, supplies that could otherwise be provided by the local market. This especially applies to commodities like food products, thereby threatening the local market. Yet if local companies were supported by the Government, they would be able to ease the problem of unemployment by creating employment opportunities for fellow citizens.

Access to Education and Availability of Skills

The problem of unemployment is not just related to the unavailability of vacancies in the market only, but also to the extent of the availability of education opportunities for young people. With limited access to a good education, good education facilities and learning material, people are disadvantaged and deprived of the education qualifications and skills that place them at a better position of finding employment.

Work is a human right, and like all other rights, its promotion is necessary for the realisation of social justice. But work is also a right upon which civil peace is dependant. Unemployment may cause social exclusion to its victims, which may lead to social unrest. Some unemployed people, feeling sidelined and frustrated, may resort to violent demonstrations that sometimes lead to looting, theft and even killings. The 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa is an example of the extent to which some unemployed and disgruntled people can go to express their grievance. In South Africa, the frustration was directed towards foreigners who were perceived to be taking jobs meant for South Africans. Yet people overlooked the responsibility of the Government in bringing about that situation. For example, it could have been that these foreigners had better education qualifications than the disgruntled nationals, such that companies preferred employing them than employing South Africans. This is especially true when one does a survey of South African universities, which are littered with foreign students; South African companies who even have foreigners in their top management; and small businesses such as restaurants and security companies who have a sizeable number of foreigners in their staff.

This therefore shows the importance of the role of government in preparing young people through a good education system that does not solely focus on strictly academic subjects, but that offers vocational and skills training as well. The availability of and access to these education opportunities increase the opportunities for employment.

The Problem of Low Wages

The obligation to exercise justice in the allocation of wages is usually compromised by the employers' desire for maximisation of profit. In order to ensure that the cost of production and the running of a company are as cost-effective as possible, some companies end up giving unfair wages to their employees.

One other contributing factor to the problem of low wages is the legal minimum wage which is set at K419 000 (excluding allowances). Some employers strictly stick to this amount when paying their workers, an amount insufficient for one to support themselves and their families (which requires at least K2 000 000 a month according to the JCTR Basic Needs Basket). The challenge of low wages is mostly faced by those in the informal sector, where it is difficult for the State to monitor and regulate conditions of labour in this sector.

Of course there are factors that help determine the amount of remuneration that one should get, such as one's expertise, contribution and input, and the financial status of the company for which one works, or that of the country. However, justice still needs to be exercised in the presence of these factors within a company.

Conditions of Labour

Although labour laws in Zambia do state the conditions under which workers should perform their duties, some employers do not follow these statutory directives. We often hear of abuses in work places, as *Story Three* above depicts. Abuses are usually common in foreign owned businesses and in less formalised employment such as in domestic work, but even in formalised employment such as in the mining industry.

This would therefore mean that one factor that causes or at least that perpetuates the problem of poor working conditions is the poor enforcement of the law and the absence of effective monitoring mechanism by the Government's Labour Ministry to ensure that employers provide good working conditions for their employees.

The other factor that contributes to the problem of poor conditions of service in some companies is the insatiable need for the maximisation of profit. These companies try to limit as much as possible the cost of production, which often leads to compromise in safety standards and the ignoring of various benefits and rights which people are entitled to as workers.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. Are there other factors that you think contribute to employment challenges in the country?
2. What other forms of abuse or injustice in employment can you note?
3. Have you in anyway done an injustice to a person or people who were put under your charge?

Concluding Prayer

One member of the group should give a concluding prayer to close the discussion.

Session Three: Theological Reflection

“Work is a fundamental right and a good for mankind, a useful good, worthy of man because it is an appropriate way for him to give expression to and enhance his human dignity. The Church teaches the value of work not only because it is always something that belongs to the person but also because of its nature as something necessary” (Rerum Novarum).

The dignity of the human person is the foundational principle of the social teaching of the Church. The Church sees all social activity as revolving around the human person for the person’s flourishing. Likewise, with regard to labour, the Church sees human labour not only as proceeding from the person, but as also essentially ordered to and as having its final goal in the human person.

Work makes possible the attainment and enjoyment of one’s independence. Getting a decent income facilitates the acquisition of private property, thus making it possible for one to be self-sufficient and less dependant on others for one’s upkeep. Over-dependence on others at times reduces one’s self-esteem, self-worth and self-respect, thus blemishing one’s dignity. Dependency opens opportunities for the abuse of the dependant by the one who provides the assistance. Women are the most vulnerable in such situations. When people are getting a decent salary, they reduce this dependence and exercise greater autonomy in directing their own lives.

The income that we get from our labour expands our freedoms and human functionings. If we have money, we are able to engage in various activities and buy various things that we as human beings require for a decent life. Closely related to this is also our ability to enjoy other economic, social and cultural rights such as the right to food, clean water, adequate housing and health, all these being necessary for a dignified life. Our dependants are also able to enjoy rights such as the right to education. Labour thus makes it possible for us to lead happy and fulfilled lives that we otherwise would not if we had no work, and therefore no source of income.

Good remuneration from our labour also makes it possible for us to participate in society and to enjoy the benefits of contemporary cultural and technological innovations. Poverty has the tendency to marginalise people by pushing them to the periphery of society. Such people are not offered the opportunity to enjoy with others the benefits of belonging to and being an active member of society contributing to the common good. These benefits of employment make it an imperative that the right to employment and the dignity which accompanies it be promoted by the relevant sectors of society, especially the Government.

Employment Creation

The Church’s social teaching encourages governments to be in the forefront in the creation of an enabling environment for the creation of employment opportunities for their peoples. A government can do this by enacting and promoting active labour policies that create conditions which ensure job opportunities by stimulating, sustaining and supporting business activities. Since work is a right as well as a good that belongs to everyone, it must be made available for everyone capable of engaging in it. “Full employment therefore remains a mandatory objective for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good” (*Compendium*, 288).

Fair Wages

In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*, 1981), Pope John Paul II stresses that the needs of the poor must take priority over the desires of the rich, and the rights of workers over the maximization of profit. In another encyclical entitled *Mater et Magistra* (*Mother and Teacher*, 1961), Pope John XXIII points out that remuneration for work should be determined in accordance with justice and equity, which will enable workers to live a truly human life and to fulfill their family obligations in a worthy manner. A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work.

Conditions of Labour

Labour has dignity and value only because it is performed by the human person. The conditions under which work is carried out should therefore be such that they respect the dignity of the person carrying out the work. The social teaching of the Church stresses that “it is essential that within a business the legitimate pursuit of profit should be in harmony with the irrenounceable protection of the dignity of the people who work at different levels in the same company” (*Compendium*, 342). Exploitation of a person is an offence to their dignity.

The Church insists on the intrinsic priority of labour over capital, since it is labour that is the cause of production. Capital, however, does play a complementary, important and instrumental role as a means of production. However, whilst the two are complementary, labour, an undertaking by a human being, should always take precedence.

The Rights of Workers

Workers, like other special groups of people, have rights that are meant to promote their dignity. First and foremost, they have a right to good and just working conditions, as mentioned above. Secondly, they have a right to fair remuneration, which is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships. Workers also have a right to be in solidarity with each other by belonging to labour unions that seek to defend their rights, and where these rights are violated, they have the right to strike. They also have a right to sufficient rest, and this should be respected, especially with regard to obligatory religious days of worship (such as Sunday for many Christians) and public holidays. The institution of the Sabbath (Genesis 2:2) by God who rested from all work testifies to the importance of rest, and affirms that “work is for the human person and not the human person for work” (*Compendium*, 272).

Women and Work

For a long time, women have bore much of the brunt of employment challenges, especially with regard to their unequal treatment to men in remuneration and general social security. They have also been victims of sexual abuse in work places. Women are also the worst hit by the problem of unemployment. Again, appealing to the equal and invaluable dignity of all persons, the Church strongly believes that “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society; therefore the presence of women in the workplace must also be guaranteed” (*Compendium*, 295). This can be done so especially through the facilitation of women’s access to education and professional formation, and by putting in place effective affirmative action policies.

Migrants and Work

Migrant workers tend to suffer the most unjust labour conditions and have the least protection from the law when they face abuse and violence. It is the Church's teaching that all persons are endowed with an inalienable dignity, and that the same civil protection provided to nationals of a country be also provided for migrant workers without discrimination. Migrants' role in filling labour needs which would otherwise remain unfilled by the nationals of the host country, and their general contribution to the development of the host country should be acknowledged.

Attitude Towards Work

On our own part as labourers, we should not see work as a burden that has to be endured. Work is part of our human existence and has been given to us by God the Creator as an activity we should undertake in order to participate in his continuous creative activity as well as to express our humanity. According to the Genesis account of creation, God instructed the first human couple to be the stewards of the earth, to "cultivate and care for it" (Gen 2:15). Through work, an activity in which we use our intelligence, creativity and other talents, we benefit not only ourselves, but contribute to the common good as well by transforming our world into a better place for the fulfillment and happiness of all. Work thus becomes not only a right, but a duty that has to be performed for the development of one's own humanity and that of others. As a divinely sanctioned activity, work should be fulfilling and not enslaving to those partaking in it.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. What is your own understanding of labour as a Christian?
2. Do you think that the Church Social Teaching adequately addresses the issue of employment?
3. What other benefits do you think are brought by employment?

Concluding Prayer

God our Father, you created all of us in your own image. Grant us your goodness and help us to value the dignity that is in every person in the manner in which we treat them. Grant us the strength and the will that we need in order that we may dedicate ourselves fully in all that we do. Amen.

Session Four: Response

The issue of employment is a complex one that demands more than just our personal and communal response to its challenges. Significant change can only be effected at policy level by policy makers, mainly the Government and its departments, and also through effective implementation of good policies. The following are some of the actions that should be considered and undertaken for the problems of employment to be effectively addressed.

- i. The Zambian Government should mandate the Ministry of Finance and National Planning to be the focal government institution that should drive the employment generation agenda as well as provide a coordination mechanism for various policies and institutions dealing with formal employment in Zambia.
- ii. Government should improve labour market and employment statistics through the generation of data to provide a basis for evidence based planning and monitoring in the area of employment. In addition to this, Government should report on employment creation targets in every national budget - alongside economic growth and inflation targets - and provide on how to achieve the employment target set in the Sixth National Development Plan (2011-2015).
- iii. The Government, especially through the Ministry of Labour, should fervently enforce labour laws and make sure that employees abide by them. Close relationships with labour unions should be established as it is through these workers express their grievances.
- iv. Foreign direct investment should be governed in a manner that improves employment returns. This calls, among others, for a re-visitation of the structure of investment incentives to ensure that it supports domestic investment.
- v. There is need for economic diversification for the creation of more employment opportunities, as opposed to having an economy that is mostly driven by the mining sector which is not employment-intensive. Hence the Government needs to aggressively pursue, as a complement to the mining sector, the development of employment-intensive sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing by implementing targeted industrial policies.
- vi. The education and training system needs to be re-oriented and strengthened in order to improve the quality of skills of youths and their employability. In schools, non-curricular activities such as sports and music should be promoted and graded so as to cater to the needs of non-academically oriented students, and thus increase their chances of finding employment outside mainstream corporate employment.
- vii. Government could also introduce a youth learnership wage and a youth training subsidy for companies providing youth apprenticeship programmes and on-the -job training.

In our individual and group capacity, we can contribute to the realisation of the above through:

- i. Belonging and participating actively in advocacy activities in our communities.
- ii. Belonging and participating actively in labour movements and their activities.
- iii. Engaging our local MPs in the discussion on employment issues as they are the ones who help formulate policies.
- iv. Making employment an election issue during election time.
- v. Having the courage to demand that our dignity and rights be respected at work by our employers and co-workers.

However, on a more personal level, we should also keep in mind that even if we ourselves may not be employers as such, we do often find ourselves in charge of someone else or a group of people, or with a responsibility whose exercise affects other people around us. It is therefore important for us to realise that we have a moral responsibility to respect the dignity of those who are affected by the decisions we make. Our respect for the dignity of other persons should be the basis of the nature of our relationship with them. There is truth in the saying “charity begins at home”.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. What other policies and measures do you think the Government should put in place to deal with the challenges of employment?
2. What have you done yourself in your own capacity to fight injustice in your work place?
3. In what ways can you show solidarity with those who are unemployed and do not have a source of livelihood?

Concluding Prayer

One member of the group should give a concluding prayer to close the discussion.

Conclusion

The issue of employment touches the very core of our human development, since it is work that conditions to a large extent the process of our personal development. It becomes difficult for us to achieve this end in the midst of unemployment and the afflictions of working in poor conditions and in receiving inadequate and unjust salaries. As an instrument against poverty, work is necessary for us to live dignified lives free from basic material wants. It is the hope of the JCTR that the contents in this booklet will increase the readers’ appreciation of the importance of work in the promotion of human dignity, and that this appreciation will move the readers into action within their own spheres of influence in advocating good policies for good quality employment creation for all Zambians.

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Moyo, Anold

Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection

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